Ernest Lawson

PAINTING the LANDSCAPE

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ERNEST LAWSON (1873–1939), a Nova Scotia-born painter, spent most of his life in the United States, where he is well known for his contributions to American Impressionism. Lawson's art was influenced by his studies of Impressionism. He spent time in France painting with Alfred Sisley (1839–1899), a well-known French Impressionist artist, who like Lawson, considered himself to be primarily a landscape painter.

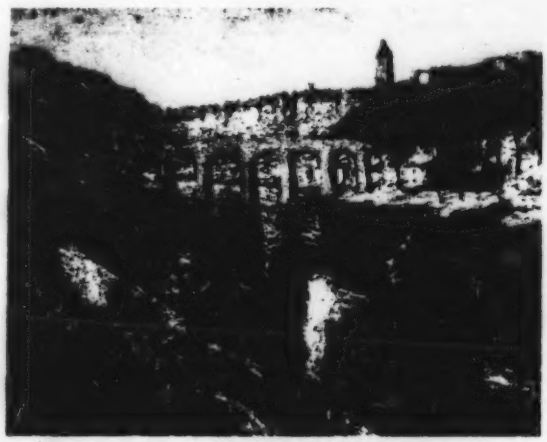
The focus of this exhibition is Ernest Lawson's landscape painting, highlighting his use of Impressionist painting techniques. The paintings date from 1900–1935 and have been drawn from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's collections, a local private collection and the Dalhousie Art Gallery. Lawson produced many of the works in this exhibition on a painting trip to Nova Scotia in 1924.

Many Impressionist painters were interested in painting landscapes, but not classical depictions of pastoral scenes. Like Lawson, Impressionist artists were interested in common everyday life and the landscapes and cityscapes around them. They were also innovative in their choice and application of colour to achieve optical mixing and visual effects. Their focus was not the composition of a scene but the effect of light on the scene's form and colour. Impressionist painters rarely prepared preliminary sketches for their paintings, believing landscapes were best rendered outdoors rather than working from study sketches and paintings in the studio.

Lawson experienced Impressionist influences early in his artistic career and they guided his work through the rest of his life. Lawson often changed his method according to the scene he was painting. He employed a variety of Impressionist techniques, influenced by the season, weather, and location of the area in which he was painting, and he adapted his colour palette and paint application to suit his impression of the scene. His paintings are studies of the American and Canadian landscapes he encountered, rendered in rich colours in a spontaneous manner.

Early Influences

Ernest Lawson showed an early aptitude for art and by the age of ten he was drawing portraits of his family and pets. Although his father did not approve of a career in the arts, Lawson moved to New York City to attend the Art Students League. There, he studied under John N. Twachtman (1853-1902) and J. Alden Weir (1852-1919), who taught an Impressionist approach to landscape painting. Lawson attended their summer school in Cos Cob, Connecticut, where he painted outdoors for the first time. His studies with Twachtman and Weir played a major role in his development and subsequent recognition as an American Impressionist painter. Art critic Hilton Kramer concluded that, "The crucial influence on Lawson was Twachtman's…and he never strayed very far from his basic influence in a long lifetime of painting."[1]



The Bridge, 1912, Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Twachtman was also a landscape painter, although his style was more subtle than that of Lawson, who favoured a richer colour scheme and more energetic application of paint. In his painting, *Winter Scene* (1900), Lawson uses a white on white theme, tinting his white with a variety of colours – blue, gold, brown, red – to depict the distinctive effects of sunlight and shadow in the scene, a major focus of Impressionist work. He applied his paint in a thick impasto, creating high contrast on the surface by using a palette knife to smooth the buildings and short, rough brushstrokes to texture the surrounding land.

In 1893, Ernest Lawson departed for France. After three months at the Académie Julian, Lawson moved on to Moret-sur-Loing, a small village outside Paris, where he painted with Alfred Sisley. (Artist Camille Pissarro once described Sisley as the best example of a typical Impressionist painter.) Sisley painted landscapes exclusively – any human figures in his work were always part of the background and never the focus of the scene. Both Sisley and Lawson favoured a varied brushstroke and a deep rich colour palette.

Lawson, too, was dedicated to landscape painting; although he created several fine portraits, Lawson considered himself first and foremost a landscape painter.

Harlem River Period

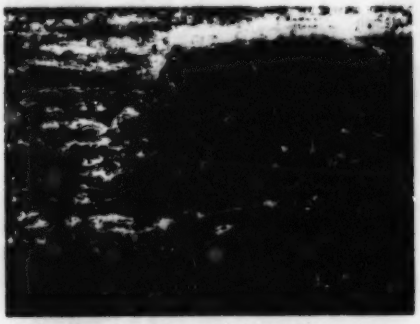
After spending almost four years in France, with only a brief journey home to be married in 1894, Lawson returned to settle in the United States. In 1898, Lawson and his family moved to the Washington Heights area of New York City. New York was already home to many of the major American artists of the time. Lawson rapidly made friends in the art community and through William Glackens he met John Sloan, George Luks, and Everett Shinn. Like Lawson, these artists had been rejected by the National Academy of Art for their portrayals of common life and everyday scenes. In 1908, they joined with Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast, and Arthur B. Davies to exhibit as a group called "The Eight," who came to be known as "The Ashcan School," for their interest in social realism, which some critics believed to be subject matter no better than "ashcans."[2] Although Ernest Lawson was not interested in rendering common life on the streets of New York, he did draw upon a rich source of local subject matter for his paintings, the Hudson and Harlem Rivers and the life that flourished along their wooded shorelines. The years that Lawson spent in this area came to be known as his Harlem River Period.

Castle In Segovia, 1916, Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Like other Impressionist artists who often repeatedly painted the same scene, Lawson painted the Harlem River at different times of day and during different seasons. Lawson's painting *The Bridge* (1912) was one of many he did of the Harlem River bridge. His thick application of paint and obvious brushstrokes are reminiscent of French Impressionism, particularly Sisley's rendering of landscapes. Lawson also started using both a palette knife and his fingers to apply and manipulate paint, applying thicker layers and building up the surfaces of his works.

Segovia

Over the course of his career, Ernest Lawson won numerous awards for his artwork, including a silver medal and cash prize from the Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings in 1916. Lawson decided to use these winnings to go overseas and paint. He went to Spain, a country unaffected by the conflicts of WW I, settling in Segovia. *Castle in Segovia* (1916) is a graceful work of intense colour that reflects a departure for Lawson from his previous approach to painting. *Castle in Segovia* exhibits a stronger composition than many of his previous paintings and is reminiscent of French Impressionist Paul Cezanne's work. Unlike many of Lawson's works, where the buildings blend into the landscape, the castle in this landscape stands out clearly and there is a high degree of contrast between the foreground and background of the scene. Lawson also lightened his colour palette and used soft, wide, and rhythmic brushstrokes, instead of the short, choppy strokes he employed in his Harlem River Period. Unfortunately, his new approach to painting was not well-received by audiences in the United States, who seemed to prefer Lawson's earlier works, which were darker and appeared more spontaneous.



Rocks at Peggy's Cove, 1924, Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

Visits Home

In 1924, Ernest Lawson came to Canada to visit and paint in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia paintings are a study in stylistic diversity, illustrating how Lawson changed his painting technique to suit the mood of a scene. *Low Tide on the Nova Scotia Coast* (1924) depicts a hazy day, composed of pastel colours applied in a flat manner. The brushstroke is soft and rhythmic, and the subjects – grass, buildings and trees – appear to blend together. *Rocks at Peggy's Cove* (1924) exhibits a bleak atmosphere and Lawson's thick application of pure colour smeared across the canvas creates visual contrast between the rocks and seascape. *Garden* (1924) is a small, brightly-coloured work of a summer backyard garden. As in *Rocks at Peggy's Cove*, the canvas is painted with thick layers of colour, but Lawson overlays this with highly textured, tiny daubs of brilliant colour. Ernest Lawson has been referred to as "Lawson of the crushed jewels" [3] and his execution of *Garden* does justice to this reference.

Low Tide on the Nova Scotia Coast, 1924, Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

Although Ernest Lawson spent most of his life in the United States, Nova Scotians claim him as one of their own.

In 1919, the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts, predecessor of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, honoured Lawson by organizing a solo exhibition of his work.

Living in New York, he is acknowledged to be one of the greatest of American landscape painters. This collection of his work of recent years, shows a rich and vigorous technique, a sense of colour that is both tender and forceful, and a wholesome quality of vision in the sincere expression of the simple beauty of out-of-door nature. — Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts exhibition catalogue[4]

Three of the paintings shown at this exhibition in 1919 were purchased by the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts for their permanent collection. Although Impressionism was still not recognized as a major art movement in this country,

Garden, c.1924, On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell

Canada's National Gallery became the first museum to acquire Lawson's work when, in 1911, they purchased *Snow-Bound Boats* (1907) for their permanent collection. Despite this formal Canadian recognition, and the family ties he maintained in Canada, he continued to pursue his career as an artist in the United States.

Lawson's Later Years

In 1928, Ernest Lawson accepted a teaching position at the Kansas City Art Institute. By this time, he had separated from his wife and family. The stress of marital strife and the struggle to make a living as an artist also led Lawson to drink heavily. Although he was well-recognized for his artwork and his contributions to American Impressionism, many of Lawson's paintings were slow to sell. The stylistic changes evident in his work – his frequent change of colour palette and painting technique – left many viewers confused. Consequently, Ernest Lawson's art was not well understood. After teaching at the Kansas Art Institute for a year, Lawson accepted a position at Broadmoor Art Academy in Colorado Springs, but the effects of the Depression, resulting in fewer sales of his artwork, and his deteriorating health, due to rheumatoid arthritis, were taking their toll.

Key West, Florida, c.1935, Collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery

Royce Powell and his wife were long-time friends of Ernest Lawson. In his later years, Lawson made frequent visits to stay with the Powells at their home in Coral Gables, Florida. They were supportive of Lawson and encouraged him to continue with his painting. In 1931, Lawson began to visit the Powells annually, and in 1936 he moved to Coral Gables. His painting *Key West, Florida* (1935) was completed during one of his visits with the Powells. It is a joyous work resplendent in brilliant, rich colours that accurately reflect the lushness of the tropical landscape. Lawson applied his paint thickly and quickly and glimpses of the raw canvas dotting the surface indicate the speed of his execution.

By 1937, Lawson was financially dependent upon the American government, who paid a small stipend to artists who completed one work of art a month. In addition to this, he received a mural commission from the Fort Hills Post Office in New Jersey. However, Lawson continued to struggle financially until his sudden death in 1939 at age 66.

Ernest Lawson left a legacy of American and Canadian Impressionist landscape paintings. His art reflects his personal understanding of the scenes he encountered, and his skills as an Impressionist artist enabled him to adapt his style to capture the fleeting atmosphere of change in nature. Ernest Lawson's varied brushstroke had an impulsive quality that added an air of spontaneity to his work; a hallmark of Impressionist painting that makes his art sought after to this day.

Kris Webster,
Guest Curator

Notes

1 Richard Boyle, *American Impressionism* (New York: Graphic Society, Ltd., 1974), p.166.

2 The Eight (Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, Maurice Prendergast, Arthur B. Davies, and Ernest Lawson) exhibited in 1908 at the Macbeth Gallery in New York City.

3 Frederic Newlin-Price, *Lawson of the Crushed Jewels*, International Studio, Vol. 78.

4 Exhibition introduction: Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts exhibition catalogue – *Exhibition of Paintings by Ernest Lawson from Friday June 6th until June 14th (1919)*.

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

The first exhibition of Ernest Lawson's paintings in Halifax was organized by Arthur Lismer in 1919 through the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts, which became the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1975. The exhibition was installed at the Victoria School of Art (now the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), where Lismer served as principal between 1916 and 1919.

Although born in Halifax, Lawson became well-known as an American Impressionist artist and spent most of his life in the United States. **Ernest Lawson – Painting the Landscape** focuses on landscape paintings and highlights his use of Impressionist painting techniques.

Ernest Lawson studied and painted in New York with the American Impressionists John Twachman and Alden Weir, and in France with Alfred Sisley. He maintained ties with his maritime heritage, however, returning often to Nova Scotia to paint. This exhibition features several works from his painting trip to Nova Scotia in 1924 and provides an opportunity to present seven works from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's collection of Lawson paintings, which recently added a major work entitled *Summer Clouds*. This important acquisition was made possible with the support of the Art Sales and Rental Society and the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board. Additional paintings have been selected from the Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the Estate of the late Charles Mitchell, and Dalhousie Art Gallery. Their generosity is acknowledged and sincerely appreciated.

It has been a pleasure to work with the guest curator, Kris Webster, who has assembled an exciting exhibition and provided an excellent introduction to Lawson's work. This exhibition coincides with **Impressionist Masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada** and re-acquaints Nova Scotians with the work of a native born Impressionist artist. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Kris for the outstanding work she has done in the organization and display of the works by this remarkable artist.

I also wish to acknowledge all the Gallery staff who assisted in bringing this exhibition to you. Their dedication and standards of excellence deserve respect and admiration.

With good wishes —
Bernard Riordon, Director

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to everyone at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia for their generous support and encouragement. A special note of thanks to Bernie Riordon for the privilege of curating the exhibition, Ray Cronin for his editorial guidance and Laurie Hamilton for uncovering the beauty of *Key West, Florida*. I would also like to thank Judy Dietz and Beth Shields for accommodating my many requests to visit the Lawson paintings in the vaults and Fraser Ross for his insightful catalogue design, which reflects the quiet beauty of Lawson's work.

Kris Webster

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COVER: *Winter Scene*, c.1900, Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

ARTIST CHRONOLOGY

1873 March 22, Ernest Lawson is born in Halifax, Nova Scotia

1883 Lawson's parents move to Kansas City, Missouri, and Ernest goes to Kingston, Ontario, to live with his aunt and uncle

1888 Ernest joins his parents in Kansas City and begins to study art

1890 Lawson follows his father to Mexico City and gets a job as a draftsman

1891 Moves to New York City and enrolls at the Art Students League where he studies with John Twachtman and J. Alden Weir

1893 Leaves New York City for Paris, France, where he studies briefly at the Académie Julian, the largest private school in Paris

1894 Marries Ella Holman

1896 Daughter Margaret is born

1897 The Lawson family return to the United States to settle;
Lawson teaches at Columbus, Georgia, after a brief stay in Toronto;
Daughter Dorothy is born

1898 The Lawsons move to Washington Heights, New York City

1908 Lawson exhibits with "The Eight" in New York

1913 Exhibits at the International Exhibition of Modern Art, also known as the Armory Show, in New York City

1916 Lawson and his family go to Segovia, Spain

1917 Returns to the United States and continues to paint in New York and New Jersey

1919 A solo exhibition of Lawson's work is held at the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts in Halifax, Nova Scotia

1924 Lawson visits Nova Scotia to paint

1926 Teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute

1927 Teaches at the Broadmoor Art Academy, Colorado Springs

1928 Lawson visits Nova Scotia to attend his mother's funeral

1930 Lawson visits his daughter Margaret in France

1931 Visits Florida for the first time

1933 Teaches briefly in Hartford, Connecticut, and continues to make annual visits to Florida

1936 Moves to Coral Gables, Florida

1939 Lawson dies December 18 of a heart attack on a Miami beach

LIST OF WORKS

Winter Scene, c.1900
oil on canvas
51.2 x 61.6 cm
Purchase, 1917
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1917.5

The Bridge, 1912
oil on canvas
63.5 x 76.5 cm
Purchase, 1917
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1917.3

Trees and Church, c.1915
oil on canvas
41.3 x 51.6 cm
Purchase, 1946
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1946.2

Castle In Segovia, 1916
oil on canvas
51.2 x 61.0 cm
Purchase, 1946
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1946.1

The Regatta, c.1918
oil on canvas
40.9 x 50.8 cm
Purchase, 1917
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1917.4

Woods in Spring, c.1920
oil on canvas
64.1 x 77.0 cm
Purchase, 1946
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1946.3

Summer Clouds, 1924
oil on pulpboard
55.8 x 61.0 cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Government of Canada under the terms of the Cultural Property Export and Import Act and the Art Sales and Rental Society, 1999
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1999.113

Rocks at Peggy's Cove, 1924
oil on canvas
30.5 x 40.1 cm
Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1990
NSCAD1963.02

Port Medway, c.1924
oil on canvas
46.0 x 40.0 cm
Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1990
NSCAD1963.03

Low Tide on the Nova Scotia Coast, 1924
oil on canvas
38.3 x 51.1 cm
Loan Collection of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia 1990
NSCAD1963.04

Landscape, c.1924
oil on canvas
34.5 x 41.5 cm
On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2000
TL2000.3

Garden, c.1924
oil on panel
20.5 x 25.5 cm
On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2000
TL2000.5

Trees and Rocks, n.d.
oil on panel
20.5 x 25.5 cm
On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2000
TL2000.6

Red House, Sound Beach, n.d.
oil on panel
20.0 x 25.5 cm
On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell, Halifax,Nova Scotia, 2000
TL2000.7

Landscape, c.1924
monotype
19.3 x 24.5 cm
On loan from the Estate of Charles Mitchell, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2000.
TL2000.8

Key West, Florida, c.1935
oil on canvas
41.2 x 51.0 cm
Collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, donated by Robert W. Manuge, 1973
1973–10

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